Self-Fashioning Styles of Flesh: Liminal Gender Performance in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

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Abstract

Shunned by critics at the time of its release, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Mass-acre* (1974) has since been lauded by horror fans and scholars such as Robin Wood and Janet Staiger, who praise the insightful social commentary, clever use of dark humour, and technical artistry that consolidated the film into one of the most influential in the slasher subgenre and within cinematic horror as a whole. The main antagonist's subversive example of gender performance, however, has been widely overlooked. Instead of hiding his true identity behind a mask like most slashers, Leatherface literally and metaphorically embodies the identities represented by his three masks, each expressed through wigs, fashion, vocalization, and body language. While his "Killing Mask" most closely resembles a human male, his "Old Lady Mask" and his "Pretty Woman Mask" carry with them stereotypically female-gendered signifiers. However, what is truly radical about Leatherface's gender performance is its liminality: the identities he crafts are fluid themselves, not just interchangeable but malleable. He is a man, a woman, both and neither. Thus, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* follows Judith Butler's statement that gender norms are nothing but styles of flesh.

Keywords: Horror Cinema, Queer Studies, Gender Performance, Liminality

Since its release in 1974, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has occupied a unique place in cinematic horror. While initially rejected by puritanical critics, it garnered legions of fans and academic supporters. For example, Robin Wood appreciates its commentary on the United States's disillusion with capitalism through the visual metaphor of "the dead weight of the past crushing the lives of the younger generation" (82) illustrated through the vanquishment of city youths by the hands of a villainous rural family.

Likewise, Janet Staiger praises the film as an intertextual take on *Psycho* (1960) bolstered by "the horror and humor of Hitchcock in *Texas*" (182), adding to the

expanding number of inquisitive articles written about Hooper's most influential work. However, the filmic representation of the main antagonist's subversive gender performance and gender-non-conforming identity has been sadly overlooked. Carol J. Clover's popular *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* offers a limited perspective in examining Leatherface (played by Gunnar Hansen), even though he is depicted in the cover for several editions of the book and its very title references his signature weapon. What makes the case of Leatherface so pertinent to the current context of anti-queer politics in North America is that instead of hiding his true identity behind a mask, like most horror film antagonists, he embodies an array of flexible identities represented by several masks. The liminality of Leatherface's gender performance interrogates and exposes the arbitrary nature of gender norms. Ultimately, a reevaluation of one of the most iconic slashers of the genre as a symbol of dissident gender disruption is a timely exercise in unmasking the lie of heteronormativity and accepting a fluctuating spectrum of gender possibilities beyond the binary.

Ethnographer Arnold van Gennep popularized liminality as a theoretical concept through his research of social rites of passage, understood as "ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another" (3). A range of diverse rituals are dedicated to representing an individual's evolution through life cycles, reaching adulthood, becoming whole, or evolving into an elevated social/cultural status. These metaphorical journeys are typically constituted of three stages: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (11). The liminal state of being marks the moment when the subjects have begun but not yet completed the rite. There participants are in between not fully formed but and amidst transformation, resisting definition.

Societal aversion towards the undefined renders the concept of liminality as undesirable, a state that should be abandoned in pursuing the postliminal, a transition towards incorporation. This disdain towards the uncertain is explored in the work of Julia Kristeva, specifically through the abject, a concept defining that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject represents what cannot be classified within pre-existing categories. It shakes the status quo by creating an unknown alternative, driving individuals to "the place where meaning collapses" (2). This term, associated with anxiety and horror, puts into question the subjects' own identity and perception of reality.

Nevertheless, contrary to what common sense would dictate, abjection can potentially provide a beneficial transformative experience when engaged through works of art, even at its most extreme. The act of confronting the abject incites people to expand preconceived boundaries of perception, albeit sometimes only momentarily. *In Film as a Subversive Art,* Amos Vogel makes the connection between the representation of taboo topics in cinema (sources of "extremity and shock") with "an activist, transforming, subversive art, designed to eradicate the reactionary values of an establishment" (46). Abject imagery effectively advocates

for societal change, a fact reflected in worldwide demonstrations carried out by masked individuals.

Lone Riisgaard and Bjørn Thomassen argue that the fundamental power of the mask, particularly its use amongst political protesters, lies not necessarily in its concealment of identity but rather in its "liminal" and "transformative" capacity to "unify and transcend key oppositional categories and thereby dissolve the binary oppositions which form the very foundation of how we make sense of the world" (79). From this comprehensive allyship, the dismantling of harmful cultural norms can occur, opening the doors to newfound and yet unimagined "possibilities of action." Instead of merely hiding the identity of its wearer, the mask's role in ritualized demonstrations is to provide a new identity that is as formidable as it is unmeasurable, inciting opportunity for the force of the individual to become collective, for an identity to fluctuate between collective cause and personal perspective. Protesters can embrace an ideology intellectually and physically, embodying the essence of their cause as a stronger unified front, inspiring fright in its detractors. Riisgaard and Thomassen describe how the mask provokes fear by highlighting its abject liminality: "No-one knows what may or may not burst forth from behind the mask, and the tension created by the contrast between its appearance and the secret it hides can become almost unbearable" (82). The negative affect conjured by this perception is present in *Texas Chain Saw* through Leatherface's appearance; his masked semblance is one of the film's most iconic and influential images within the cinematic horror canon.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre follows the encounter between two groups of people, composed of five city youths, the other a band of local ex-farmers who practice cannibalism and punish trespassers with death. In Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), he identifies this rural posse as the Sawyer family. Drayton, the older brother, poorly oversees Nubbins (previously "Hitchhiker") and his twin, Chop-Top, who only appears in the sequel. With the help of little brother Leatherface (birth name, Bubba), they take care of their catatonic, immobile grandfather. In the middle of nowhere, they live as "representatives of an exploited and degraded proletariat" (Wood 82) since the industrial complex overtook old jobs. Unlike the rest of his kin, Leatherface does not communicate verbally, but rather through grunts and sounds, using a variety of tones rather than words to express emotions.

As Wood poignantly notes, the entirety of the Sawyer family is characterized in the film as the other, meaning "that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept" (xx). This definition comes not just from their grotesque, taboo crimes against innocent people but also because they are part of a struggling working class. It is even mentioned during the young gang's early conversation with Nubbins the hitchhiker that the Sawyers had been living on the land and working it for several generations until the modern slaughterhouse (owned by the parents of Sally, the final girl) was built in the area. Accordingly, while Leatherface's inherently murderous

lifestyle plays no small role in his configuration as an abject character, what really sets him apart from the rest of his family and away from other classic horror villains is his liminal presentation of gender. Throughout the film, Leatherface dons three individual masks, each conveying a different persona expressed through fashion, vocalization, and body language. Yet, they all culminate in the essentially flexible identity: "Leatherface." While his "Killing Mask" most closely resembles the face of a human male, his Old Lady Mask and his "Pretty Woman Mask," are marked by stereotypically female-gendered signifiers. Nevertheless, what is truly radical about this performance is that the identities he crafts are fluid themselves, not only interchangeable but adaptable to diverse combinations of signifiers.

The viewers first see Leatherface when he is wearing the Killing Mask, which he pairs with a short, slightly curly dark brown wig. When he dons it, his voice tends to be louder, lower, and more aggressive; his sounds are often akin to primal groans. The scene introducing Leatherface and his Killing Mask comes forth as one of the intruders, Kirk, walks into his seemingly empty house to ask for gas. At the end of the dingy, worn-down living room, a doorframe reveals bright red walls accentuated by the greys and browns of the colour palette surrounding it. Kirk looks at the wall like in a trance; animal heads and skulls of all shapes and sizes cover every visible surface. As soon as the youth walks into the red hall, Leatherface's intimidating figure towers over him. Kirk takes one look at his mask and then is killed with a hammer to the head. This action is completed slowly, almost apathetically, while the only sounds coming from the slasher are deep grunts. Afterwards, Leatherface grabs Kirk's body clumsily and drags him to the other room.

Leatherface's Old Lady Mask enters the film when Drayton, who has captured Sally, brings her home alongside Nubbins for a demented family dinner. This mask is adorned with a light brown wavy wig, which looks greyish from certain angles, resembling a traditional haircut associated with the blue-rinse style of senior women at the time. Instead of the disturbed growls he uses while wearing his killing mask, his speech is a series of light, high-pitched whimpers this time. When Drayton asks where the intruders went, he backs away in fear at his older sibling and points to the freezer while uttering soft whines. "None of 'em got away?!" Drayton inquires. Leatherface assures him with a snappy "Uh- uh-uh. Uh-uh-uh." During almost the entire duration of the scene, Leatherface stays in the kitchen, seemingly keeping himself busy with small chores.

As the grotesque family dinner is about to start, Leatherface is instructed to bring their grandfather out of the attic. He then decides that it is time for another change of mask. However, this one is accompanied by a change of clothes as well. His navy-blue tuxedo contrasts with the previously unseen Pretty Woman Mask, which is fully painted white except for the bright colours used for red lipstick, magenta blush, and blue eye-shadow. He pairs it with a short, dark brown curly wig. Viewers do not get as much of Leatherface's vocalization in this film segment, but it contains some of the grunts he employs while wearing his Killing Mask earlier. During dinner, unlike

his siblings, he is not as concerned with bothering their captive as he is with the eldest Sawyer; he continuously goes to his grandfather's seat to feed him carefully. He wears the Pretty Woman Mask until the film's end, including the scene where he performs his memorable chain saw dance after Sally escapes, objectively the most iconic shot in *Texas Chain Saw*.

As exemplified in the latter scene, instead of switching from one gender to another, Leatherface mixes and matches his preferred elements of performance according to his desires, coming to the arrival of something (and someone) new. In their article "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*" Judith Butler examines one of the French theorist and philosopher's most famous sentences: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Aside from the fact that it illustrates the divergence between sex and gender by placing the latter separate from one's biology, Butler notes that "the verb 'become' contains a consequential ambiguity." They continues: "For Simone de Beauvoir, it seems, Gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense gender is a process of constructing ourselves" (Butler 36). A parallel can be traced between this representation and that of fluid gender identities.

Here, it becomes relevant to point out that Leatherface is not particularly representative of what has been called the "psycho trans killer" trope, described as "a formulation that falsely equates being a murderer with both mental illness and being transgender" (Cartwright 30). In his exploration of *Texas Chain Saw* from the perspective of "Queer Crip" and critical race theory, Ryan Lee Cartwright dismisses the cultural value of Leatherface's gender presentation as supposedly stemming from the director and actor's admittedly ill-informed portrayal of "mental illness." In his own words, "Hoop and Hansen falsely understood a person with an intellectual or developmental disability to lack interiority and have the mind of an animal," and thus "extended the objectification and inferiority associated with nonhuman animals and intellectually disabled people to people who are trans or nonbinary or otherwise exceed normative gender conventions" (175). He explicitly comments on Hansen's performance: "With no intelligible lines of dialogue, all Hansen could bring to the character was his physical embodiment and the nonsense gibberish that he was directed to speak" (174). To this, I argue that Leatherface does not lack interiority; he is the character whose inner world is most realized in the film. Unlike the city posse, he has a distinctive personality, which shines through the complex emotions he constantly expresses through highly suggestive body language and vocalization, however animalistic at times. Dialogue is not essential for conveying one's identity.

This fluidity of nonverbal expression is demonstrated in a scene after Leatherface has disposed of the third victim, Jerry, who enters the house searching for his two missing friends. Inside a room resembling a kitchen, Jerry perceives sounds from a freezer and opens its lid. There he finds Pam's body, its upper half springing out like a jack in a box. Upon hearing his terrified scream,

the youngest Sawyer walks in, letting out an angry grunt and swiftly smashes Jerry's head with his trusty hammer. In the next shot, Leatherface seems agitated. He gets Pam back inside the freezer and looks around, seemingly afraid of more strangers entering. Standing near a doorframe, he peers left and right, muttering sounds that convey angsty frustration. The curtains are not fully closed on the window in the room beside him; this is where he heads, shouting, his movements jittery and nervous. He looks through the window, walks around in circles, and finally sits by it as he holds his head, adopting a posture that conjures feelings of despair. He taps his mask repeatedly, then interlocks his fingers as if in prayer, gradually calming down. While Jerry's death occurs in a matter of a few seconds, viewers have an entire minute to witness Leatherface's reactions to it. This is an extremely rare instance in which a horror film slasher is shown to be vulnerable and anxious. By showcasing the antagonist's pathos in this way, especially after committing murder, *Texas Chain Saw* establishes Leatherface as an individual capable of relatable human emotions.

Cartwright also views the harmful "psycho trans killer" trope in Leatherface's connection to real-life murderer Ed Gein, "the Wisconsin farmer, grave robber, and human taxidermist whose reputation inspired 'psycho trans' characters, from Norman Bates to Buffalo Bill" (29). The two characters he mentions, prime examples of the trope, widely differ from Hooper's antagonist in several ways, perhaps most relevant being that they both yearn to escape the liminal: they desire their transitional state to end. In *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bate's mind is occupied by the fight between his persona and his mother's for domination, which the latter wins. One of the film's final scenes features a psychiatrist who lectures the police: Norman Bates no longer exists. He only half-existed police: "Norman Bates no longer exists. He only half-existed to begin with. And now, the other half has taken over, probably, for all time." Even though "at times he could be both personalities, carrying out conversations," the psychiatrist ultimately states that "he was never all Norman. But he was often only mother." As per "psycho trans killer" Buffalo Bill, who skins women to create a suit for himself in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Jack Halberstam (writing as Judith Halberstam) notes that "[h]e is a man imitating gender, exaggerating gender and finally attempting to shed his gender in favor of a new skin" (577). He also points out how the serial killer's goal to transform into a definitive version of himself is mirrored on the souvenirs he leaves inside the throats of his victims: a Death Head Moth's cocoon. In the film, he is portrayed as "holed up in a basement waiting for his skin to grow, for his beautiful metamorphosis to take place" (Halberstam 581). Like the insect, Buffalo Bill exerts sustained efforts to evolve and become complete.

In contrast, Leatherface fully embraces the liminal nature of his gender identity. His performance might be fluid, but it does not necessarily lack cohesion. As Evangeline A. Wheeler suggests, "despite being multidimensional, internal identity has an overall coherence which gives a sense of unity rather

than the subjective perception that one's identity is fragmented" (11). Leatherface is man, woman, both and neither; his identity encompasses the personas expressed through his different masks. Accordingly, gender modification is not a struggle for him, but a creative form of self-expression. A scene contained in the DVD extras shows the character in a room adorned with hanging hand-made ornaments as he leisurely digs through several wigs he keeps in a barrel. Leatherface picks up and examines one with long blonde hair, then looks at his face in a pocket mirror while holding it close and decides to keep the curly wig he is already wearing. He distractedly sets the other one aside, then carefully applies make- up to his Pretty Woman Mask. His body language in this scene is relaxed and nonchalant, giving viewers the impression that he is enjoying himself. One final point of divergence between Leatherface and the two characters mentioned by Cartwright as examples of the "psycho trans killer" is that the films where they come from, *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, contain noir and detective procedural elements that directly address Norman Bates and Buffalo Bill's perceived queerness, which is implied to be a catalyst for crime. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Leatherface's gender identity is never put into question or even discussed by either characters or the plot; he is allowed to exist as he pleases. When assigning a specific trope to Leatherface, that of the masked slasher is more fitting to his characterization than the "psycho trans killer." It includes traditional, nonverbal horror antagonists like Michael Myers from *Halloween* (1978) and Jason from *Friday the 13th*(1980), both of which are portrayed as coldly practical, methodical killing machines. Even amongst them, Leatherface is one of a kind, as he never looks out for people to slay: unwanted visitors just arrive at his home. The film contains no decipherable instances where he maliciously extends death or tortures his captives, juvenile teasing of Sally aside. Hooper characterizes the motivation for Leatherface not as a desire to dominate and harm, but through pseudo-pragmatic acts as the consequence of hunger and perhaps the will to keep the Sawyers' secret from outsiders. To him, disposing of human beings is comparable to the slaughtering of cattle.

While it is helpful to point out and interrogate the negative stereotypes that emerge from such representations of queerness, other readings can exist alongside the condemnation of problematic fictional figures. As Julian Hanich demonstrates, "Through imaginary role-play the viewer can have it both ways: empathy with the devil and satisfaction from the victim's victory" (8). This is how queer fans of cinematic horror can see themselves in the figure of the other from an empowering perspective. Anna Powell's insightful reading of Gilles Deleuze establishes that the filmed image (just like Deleuze's concept of identity) is not configured by fixated elements but rather by ever-changing ideas in constant motion. By following strict structures of pre-assigned meanings, film theory "shaped by psychoanalysis and semiology" (Powell 10) is at risk of closing the door to alternative pathways of thought that can be exciting, interesting, and necessary. "If our subjectivity is not

fixed," Powell writes, "then our identity in the viewing experience is not a rigid template, but a fluid becoming" (207). By embracing ambiguity, people inadvertently enrich and diversify how they experience art, which should be understood as malleable.

While horror cinema is distinguished as a generic filmmaking tradition because of its heavy reliance on conventions, it is also one of the most innovative and flexible genres of film in existence. Wood writes that the proper function of cinematic horror is to expose and explore "all that our society oppresses and represses" (5). The capacity horror films have for addressing taboo aspects of the human experience is part of what makes this genre so dynamic, for it presents filmmakers with the possibility to portray the unthinkable. All metaphorical violations of social norms perpetrated by abject fictional characters, whether they win or lose in the end, shake up the foundations of traditional concepts of morality. The production of new terminology, to accommodate emerging identities which resist adhering to the rigid categories that underpin societal norms, is a threat to the cultural dominance of heteronormative ideologies. Kristeva states, "the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture … Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages" (45). This displacement ultimately denounces such identities, deemed nonexistent or invalid, rendered other and abject. "Central to the effect and fascination of horror films," Wood states, "is the fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (72). This conception resonates with the work of Harry M. Benshoff, who aligns the popular perception of queer activists with that of mad scientists in horror films, classified as "unruly, defiant and angry" in efforts to "restructure society by calling attention to and eventually dismantling the oppressive assumptions of heterocentrist discourse" (xx). While it is hard to imagine Leatherface as a scientist or an activist, his gender performance in the film, however radical and abject, can be described as an artist's work.

Hooper's sequel reveals that, in one way or another, all active Sawyers engage in artistic endeavours of some sort. Drayton is referred to as "the cook" and wins the first prize in a chili competition; Nubbins has previously been shown to be an amateur photographer, and his twin, Chop-Top, exclaims "Music is my life!" while breaking into a radio station. The first film begins with a succession of quick closeup and extreme closeup snapshots of unearthed body parts, followed by a sculpture made from corpses. A news report in the background calls it "a grizzly work of art." Because a camera flash is so prevalent in the grave-robbing scene that precedes the latter shot, and because of the somewhat excited murmur that accompany it, it is possible that this abject sculpture was a collaboration between Nubbins and his little brother.

When Leatherface creates, his work, it can take on many different shapes, including art for the sole purpose of enjoyment. A few examples of this are the multiple decorations that can be found both around the Sawyer property and the

adjacent abandoned houses. Some of these are bundles made of a combination of discarded animal parts, while others are made with human bones which hang from trees and ceilings like chimes. Another type of artistic creation Leatherface partakes in is the making of everyday utensils used around the house. Examples of this are many of the objects found by Pam after she goes into the family's home looking for Kirk, the first kill of the day. In this scene, she stumbles upon a room containing chairs and couches made of wood, animal parts and bones, many of which are distinctly human. Leatherface also got creative with lamps, later in the film, there is a floor lamp made from a human skeleton and a lampshade made from a human face. The most notable area in which Leatherface explores his creativity is his self-fashioning. Through this activity, the character endorses the idea that, under the lens of liminality, the human body "becomes a choice, a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh" (Butler, "Sex and Gender" 48). He actively configures his own identity with fashion and acting as well as crafting, sawing, and make-up artistry. The effect caused by the cinematic portrayal of Leatherface's liminal gender performance falls close to that evoked by famous actor and singer Harris Glenn Milstead, better known under the drag queen name Divine, star of John Waters's dark comedy *Pink Flamingos* (1972), amongst other filmic works showcasing abject imagery and topics. Divine, according to Butler, "destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates" ("Gender Trouble" 2541). Comparatively, Leatherface's identity directly challenges societal norms by situating the character outside the hetero/binary model. Both Leatherface and Divine remind viewers that identities, like masks, are malleable things, and that abject art can play a significant role in the dismantling of heteronormativity. The performance of gender is artistic by its very nature: "To be a gender. . . is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies. . . to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities. Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities" (Butler, "Sex and Gender" 36). Liminal gender performances are only seen as abject because, as Butler explains, when "heterosexual coherence" is disrupted, "[t]hat regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law" ("Gender Trouble" 2548). Liminal expressions of gender reveal the arbitrariness of such constructs and their ideological power over perceptions of the self and others, expanding the array of possibilities regarding self-fashioning. From its meaning in rites of passage, the concept of liminality has been developed to encompass matters of identity: androgyny and bisexuality are liminal concepts within the sex and gender spectrums, and people who are mixed-race or are transitioning between cultures can sustain liminality through their life experiences. The resonance of monstrous figures (and especially a creative slasher like Leatherface) for queer people not only arises from a metaphorical narrativization of marginal experiences onscreen, but also from the

community's capacity to command, recognize and decipher a number of mutable masks, some of which the site for pride, pleasure, and joy. Universally, per Butler, gender performance functions as a crafted mask. Hooper's iconic slasher embodies a "perpetual displacement" which "suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (Butler, "Sex and Gender" 2550). This point is remarkably reinforced by Leatherface's own nickname. As Wood suggests, "If you position yourself outside of the dominant ideology, you are forced to define and name yourself" (xvii). When observed from a queer perspective, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* follows Butler's statement that gender norms are nothing but styles of flesh.

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